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Issues, Challenges, Lessons

Russell Gersten, Ph.D., and Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D. • October 2009

Topic: Response to Intervention in Elementary-Middle Math

Highlights

- Variations in how special education fits into Response to Intervention (RtI) in various states
- RtI's challenges related to roles and responsibilities: special education teacher
- Difficulties in RtI in mathematics: lack of screening instruments, interventions, where to start implementation
- Challenges and advantages in implementing RtI in middle and high school
- Complexity of staging implementation, prioritizing a few components, persistence to attain outcomes

About the Interviewees

Russell Gersten, Ph.D.

Dr. Russell Gersten is executive director of Instructional Research Group, an educational research institute in Los Alamitos, California, as well as Professor Emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Oregon. Dr. Gersten

recently served as a member of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel, cochairing the Task Group on Instructional Practices. In 2002, Dr. Gersten received the Distinguished Special Education Researcher Award from the American Educational Research Association's Special Education Research Division.

He also chaired two recently released Practice Guides for the U.S. Department of Education on Response to Intervention (RtI) for both mathematics and reading. These are among the most frequently downloaded publications of the Department.

Dr. Gersten has been frequently interviewed by *Education Week* for articles on a wide range of topics involving mathematics education, English learners, and reading instruction. At present, he has over 150 publications and serves on the editorial boards of many prestigious journals in the field. He currently serves as a principal investigator for the What Works Clearinghouse project on English learners and as a national consultant and technical expert for numerous national research projects involving evaluation.

Dr. Gersten has conducted numerous randomized trials, many of which have been published in major journals in the field of education. He has either directed or codirected 42 applied research grants addressing a wide array of issues in education and been a recipient of many federal and nonfederal grants (totalling more than $17.5 million).

Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D.

Dr. Sharon Vaughn holds the H. E. Hartfelder/Southland Corp. Regents Chair in Human Development at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk. She is the author of numerous books and research articles that address the reading and social outcomes of students with learning difficulties. She is currently the principal investigator or coprincipal investigator on several Institute for Education Sciences, National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, and Office of Special Education Programs research grants investigating effective interventions for students with reading difficulties and students who are English language learners.

Full Transcript

Russell Gersten: I am Russell Gersten, I am executive director of Instructional Research Group, in Los Alamitos, California.

Sharon Vaughn: Hi, I am Sharon Vaughn. I am the executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk and a Regents Professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

RtI and Special Education

Gersten: What exactly is this multi-tier intervention, RtI, and where exactly does special education fit in? A couple of states have said that Tier 3 is special education. Many states have said Tier 3 is never special education. There is no clear definitive answer; there is no legal position from the U.S. Department of Ed or any of the courts. We are still trying to figure that out. We have tried, actually, in the Practice Guide to indicate that special education can play a role in a whole bunch of tiers—that part of a child's Tier 3 intervention could include some time with a special educator or a program designed by a special educator but implemented by another person at the school.

Vaughn: Russell, it's conceivable that some districts or states might have a three-tier system in which Tier 3 would be defined as special education and that Tier 2 is an increasingly intensive intervention provided to students before special ed. And in other districts and states, it might be four tiers, where the Tier 4 is special education and then the Tier 3 becomes a more intensive intervention. And so there can be variation in how these multiple tiers are implemented, and that these variations maybe within a state or across a state depending upon particular context and rules and regulations within that district and state.

Implementation Challenges

So, Russell, RtI doesn't come without challenges, as you well know, and so we probably should talk about what some of these are. And the one that occurs to me is some of the issues related to roles and responsibilities of key personnel that were very well defined in the pre-RtI days and are now being sort of refined in the RtI days. An example is the special education teacher, whose role and responsibility with respect to either being in an inclusive setting or in a resource room or in a special ed setting was pretty well understood, and now within RtI, many special education teachers are asking, "How does my role change? Am I involved in these screenings that are schoolwide? Am I involved in the multiple tiers of intervention? If so, is it only Tier 3 or Tier 4 that I am involved in?" As we implement any new program in a school district—RtI isn't the only example, of course—the roles and responsibilities of the key stakeholders do shift.

Gersten: Another thing that I find is confusion about what to do with math. In math we have some assessments for younger students. Beyond that we really lack interventions, intervention strategies, and valid ways to screen. In math where do you start? Do you start at the middle school because of this huge emphasis on algebra? Do you start as we did in reading because with younger kids you already have a system in place, K–3 teachers are familiar with it?

Vaughn: So, in addition, Russell, to challenges related to implementing math for students that have difficulties, what do you think we can do with respect to middle and high school and how we implement RtI in those settings? The vast majority of research and the largest numbers of descriptive studies around RtI really focus at the elementary level.

Gersten: It's going to play out very, very differently. There is, again, a lot of drawbacks that kids have many teachers, but there are also advantages. The pullout idea can be tied into a child's schedule. In fact, the huge issue is that the typical thing is, if a child needs an intervention in middle school or high school, they lose an elective, and what we know about engagement of kids is sometimes it could be the clubs and the electives that keep kids engaged. One nice advantage is that for an initial cut at screening, starting in third grade at every state, we have a state assessment. It's not perfect, but certainly if a kid is below proficient, you have that sign that you want to do something more.

Lessons Learned

Vaughn: One of the lessons we have learned about RtI is that we need patience. RtI is not a simple idea that can be readily implemented by a district in one professional development in one year. Districts are really going to have to think about how they build from the bottom up an effective RtI system slowly and layering these key components.

Gersten: It's always better to prioritize a few areas and do them well and then move into others.

Vaughn: It strikes me that one of the things we hope for is that schools can be persistent in organizing and retaining those critical principles of RtI that are working and that the effort and professional development it takes to building and sustaining a model RtI framework in their schools isn't discouraging to them and that they are able to reap the rewards that an RtI program can potentially yield, including increased performance in regular classrooms in math and reading, reduced numbers of students at risk, and more appropriate and timely referral of students to special education.